



PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

The Contest of Ideas with Radical Islam: The Centrality of the Idea of Religious Freedom and Tolerance

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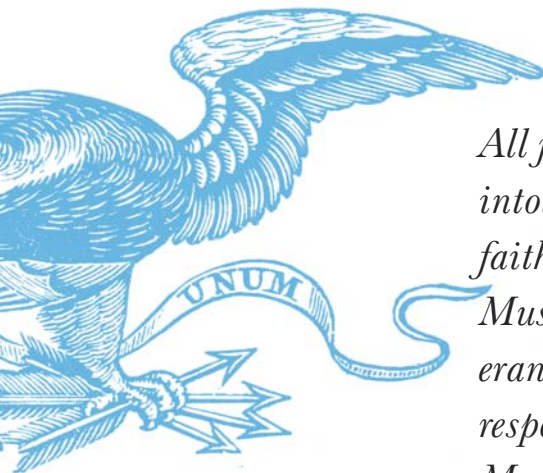
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The Contest of Ideas with Radical Islam: The Centrality of the Idea of Religious Freedom and Tolerance

By Nina Shea

“There is little doubt that eventual success in the conflict against jihadist extremism will depend less on the results of individual military engagements and more on the overall ideological climate within the world of Islam. Understanding how this climate is likely to evolve over time, and what factors—including U.S. actions—will affect it thus becomes one of the most significant intellectual challenges we face.”

—*Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, April 14, 2008*



All jihadist orthodoxies hold the core animating belief of absolute intolerance for the religious “other,” that is other religions and faith groups, as well as other Muslims, whether members of other Muslim groups or individual Muslims who dissent from intolerant orthodoxies. The contest of ideas requires a U.S. soft power response that advances religious freedom and tolerance in the Muslim world. The new administration should prioritize this effort in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iraq because of their foreign policy significance. It should press Saudi Arabia to end its sponsorship and spread of religious hatred; undertake real textbook

and education reform; end persecution of and discrimination against Shiites and individual Muslims accused of apostasy and blasphemy by its clerical establishment; and allow non-Muslim places of worship inside the Kingdom. In Iraq it should urgently adopt a comprehensive policy to specifically help endangered communities of Christians, Yizidis, and Mandeans. It should use its considerable leverage with Egypt to end official discrimination and repression against Copts, Quranists, Shiites and those accused of apostasy and blasphemy. It should oppose the trend to universalize blasphemy laws, including through bans on religious defamation now being considered at the UN; and recognize the diversity within Islam in its own Muslim outreach programs here in America.

The issue of religious freedom and intolerance is at the heart of the ideological struggle with jihadist terror. All jihadist orthodoxies hold the core animating belief of absolute intolerance for the religious “other.” While former President Bush frequently spoke about his own religious faith and at times spoke out for religious freedom, particularly in China, his administration adopted few policies to specifically advance religious freedom in the Muslim world despite the exponential spread of Islamic extremist thought over the past eight years. As a result, the battle of ideas that the Secretary of Defense has identified as so crucial has barely been joined.

On the global scale, non-Muslims have provided the most prominent victims of jihadists and other extremists. Jews, Christians, Hindus, and secularists, such as Americans and Westerners, have all been specifically targeted by jihadists for their faith. Al Qaeda, for example, identifies its enemy in the religious term of “Jews and Crusaders,” the latter meaning Westerners, particularly Americans, whether Christian or not.

But the hated “other” is frequently other Muslims. Sunni jihadists in particular consider other Muslims who do not follow their interpretation—moderate Sunnis, Shias, Sufis, and similar groups within Islam—to be non-Muslims and therefore enemies. For example, on June 23, 2007, Sheikh Saleh al-Fawzan, a member of the Saudi Senior Council of Ulama, stated in a fatwa responding to more liberal Islam that one who “desires freedom without controls, except for positive law, is a rebel against God’s law who wants the rule of jahiliyya (pre-Islam) and of the tyrant, and thus is not a Muslim.”

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Jihadists are sometimes called “takfiris,” since their ideology depends on the view that non-conforming Muslims are apostate; they do this to delegitimize their critics, to arrogate for themselves alone the right to interpret Islam, and to get around the Koranic injunction against harming other Muslims. Their Muslim targets fall into two categories: those who are members of other Muslim sects, and Muslims who may be members of the prevailing sect but express criticism or dissent on a key belief.

Adopting policies that stand up for those who are threatened and punished for holding beliefs and religions considered unorthodox by the extremists is crucial. Promoting mutual interreligious respect and freedom in specific circumstances and defending and honoring individual Muslims who promote religious freedom and those persecuted for their beliefs helps support a culture of religious pluralism that serves American interests. A clear example of the centrality of religious freedom to other human rights is the recent case of an editor of a women’s magazine in Afghanistan who wrote a critique of the country’s blasphemy laws in order to advance women’s freedoms; he was immediately arrested for blasphemy and put on trial for his life.

Core American principles of religious freedom, pluralism, and tolerance must extend to our government’s Muslim outreach and advocacy programs. Gatekeepers who serve Saudi government interests should not be charged with carrying out government events and programs. For too long, the U.S. government has relied heavily in its Muslim outreach on individuals and institutions that are prominent simply because they have Saudi and Gulf support and that espouse views starkly at odds with American values of free speech and religious freedom, in particular. The new administration must recognize the rich diversity within Islam and not treat it as monolithic.

Over the past year, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has repeatedly stressed the increasing importance of soft power to success in the U.S. war against terror. The Obama administration has a key role to play in changing the hostile ideology undergirding jihad terror through soft power policies. Many opportunities, large and small, will present themselves in which the administration must stand up for religious freedom and oppose punishment for apostasy, blasphemy, heresy, and related religious offenses.

Saudi Arabia is a prime example. The Wahhabi clerics and the dominant elements they influence in the Saudi government promote at home and abroad an ideology that teaches religious hatred and sanctions jihad and violence to “spread the faith,” as one state twelfth-grade textbook asserts. Saudi Arabia is the only country where no churches, temples, or synagogues are allowed. Saudi Wahhabism is so extreme, it has been likened by one U.S. government terrorism expert to “kindling for Usama Bin Laden’s match.” The international spread of Saudi extremism has contributed to the rise of al Qaeda and many other jihadis. Two factors contribute to Saudi Arabia’s singular influence: vast oil wealth and the legitimacy conferred by its “Cus-

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todianship” of the two holiest shrines of Islam, in Mecca and Medina. The U.S. has taken measures to curb Saudi funding of terror, but diplomacy to counter the Saudi ideological threat remains weak and ineffective.

In the last year, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom found that even a Saudi embassy school near Washington, DC, used textbooks instructing, “it is permissible for a Muslim to kill an apostate,” and “[m]ajor polytheism (i.e., Shi’ism) makes blood and wealth permissible (can be killed and robbed with impunity).” This latter belief was a key aspect of the Saudi-promoted jihadist invasion of Iraq after 2003. Like al Qaeda, Saudi government-published educational materials also build a narrative centered on an apocalyptic conflict that “the Jews and the Christians are enemies of the believers” and that “the clash” between the two realms “continues until the Day of Resurrection.”

Saudi Arabia exports its extreme Islamic interpretation worldwide. According to author Lawrence Wright, the Saudis support through the Wahhabi establishment most of the expenses of the entire faith, overriding other traditions of Islam. Abdurrahman Wahid, the former President of Indonesia and former head of the world’s largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, has courageously written about the threats posed by Wahhabi ideology and its global expansion. Hundreds of Pakistan’s most dangerous madrassas, including those that have counted among their students the terrorists in Bali, London, and Mumbai, are Saudi-supported. The Hamas charter and texts appear in some of their most incendiary parts to have been taken straight from Saudi state textbooks. Israel’s ambassador to the United States recently identified such textbooks as the “second threat after a nuclear Iran,” because by teaching children to “hate Americans and Europeans and Westerners and moderates and Jews and Israelis could ... destroy the hope for better days.”

The status of the Wahhabi clerical establishment, as exemplified by the problems of Saudi textbook and education reform should be a high priority for the Obama administration. This should include systematic, regular, and sharper analysis of the situation of religious pluralism and general religious freedom in the kingdom, including textbook reviews and analysis, within the annual religious freedom and human rights reports. It should commission an extensive, serious, factual, and objective study of the position of the king, the nature of small reforms and gestures he has made, and whether such minor changes can become major changes. It should immediately press for general religious freedom within Saudi Arabia, such as exists in every Gulf state on Saudi borders, from Kuwait to Yemen, where Shia husseiniyat and Sufi meeting houses, Christian churches, Hindu and Buddhist temples, and, in Bahrain and Yemen, even Jewish synagogues can operate. It should call for an end to the oppression of those who call for greater moderation and tolerance: examples include Hassan Al-Maliki, who, in 2007, after publicly criticizing Saudi education for carrying the message that “whoever disagrees with

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Wahhabism is either an infidel or a deviant—and should repent or be killed,” was threatened with beheading by a Saudi state cleric, and liberal journalists, Yusef Aba Al-Khail and Abdullah bin Bejad al-Otaibi, who were pronounced by another state cleric last year as “apostates” who should be killed because they had challenged the Wahhabi teaching that all non-Muslims must be considered “unbelievers.”

U.S. efforts to expand religious pluralism in Saudi Arabia must be undertaken at senior levels and sustained. The U.S. must not continue the practice of relegating diplomacy on this issue virtually entirely to the International Religious Freedom Office, a small, isolated office within the State Department, or of sweeping troubling texts under the rug with publicized praise for very limited and insignificant textbook edits, and it must cease the practice of describing the Saudi state as “moderate.”

Iraq is currently seeing the extinction of its ancient non-Muslim communities—Chaldean, Assyrian, and other Christians, Mandeans and Yazidis—under the pressure of terror, religious intolerance, and due to the failure of the government to adequately protect and help them. As President Obama wrote in September to Secretary Rice, these religious minorities “have paid a heavy price” in the conflict and “continue to constitute a disproportionately high percentage of the Iraqi refugee population.” The Christians and other defenseless minorities have historically served as mediators between the Islamic world and the West. They have supported individual liberties and the Iraqi constitution’s bill of rights, and have served as a moderating influence on the side of those who reject Iran-style theocracy. They also make up a disproportionate number of the professional and skilled class. It serves American interests to ensure their continued presence within Iraq.

The Mandeans, the ancient followers of John the Baptist, report their exodus from Iraq since 2003 has reached 90 percent, the “point of no return.” Christians and Yazidis are said to have declined within Iraq by half, and are considered “endangered” communities by experts. Since a coordinated bombing campaign against Christian churches in Baghdad in late 2004, it has been apparent that non-Muslims are being targeted for their faith by extremists. Since then, violence against them has continued and, as the surge flushed terror north into Mosul and Nineveh, over the past year has even intensified despite reduced violence overall in Iraq. Iraqi Christian ancient homelands are in Nineveh, and hundreds of thousands of Christians have fled there from violence in Baghdad and Basra in recent years, making the north their last place of refuge within Iraq and now putting them directly in harm’s way. The kidnapping and murder of the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Mosul last March and the targeted killings of Christians there this past fall attest to the dire threat they still face. In addition, lacking militias, they have sought local protection by trying to enlist in the national police force but have been blocked from doing so for over two years by Kurdish authorities in Mosul.

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Kurdish provincial authorities have also marginalized the Christians politically and economically, disenfranchising them during the 2005 elections, and depriving them of their fair share of reconstruction aid, as has been documented in the State Department's own reports.

The Bush administration was reluctant to acknowledge the fact that Christians and other non-Muslims are being driven out of Iraq, and it did not undertake policies targeted to specifically help them either to stay in Iraq or obtain refuge in the U.S. Last July, the Bush administration failed to adopt an 18-point policy option brief on Iraq's vulnerable religious minorities drafted within the National Security Council. In contrast, it did make the Sunni-Shiite sectarian conflict a policy priority with beneficial results.

In December, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended that Iraq be formally designated a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for the first time since the rule of Saddam Hussein, finding that Iraq had become among "the most dangerous places on earth for religious minorities." It published policy recommendations to help Iraq's most vulnerable religious minorities that included safeguards for the upcoming provincial elections, self-policing, reconstruction aid, ensuring constitutional rights, and other measures.

The Obama administration must not delay in acting to help preserve within Iraq these rapidly dwindling communities. The failure to adopt policies, such as those recommended by USCIRF, to address the specific threats facing the small religious minorities is having a catastrophic effect on them and will result in a less pluralistic, more intolerant Iraq. While facilitating refugee status in the U.S. is needed for the most vulnerable of them, the new administration should adopt a comprehensive policy aimed at enabling these religious minorities to maintain their communities within Iraq. This issue should be understood as a security imperative in the contest of ideas, as well as a human rights crisis.

On another Iraqi issue, Kurdistan has the highest rate of so-called "honor murders" in the entire world, and the highest rate of female genital mutilation outside the Arab-African culture area. The U.S. should take action on this, given American influence in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Egypt, the largest Arab country, has been traditionally a center of power and influence in the Muslim world, and is the site of the oldest center of Islamic thought. It is also home to the Muslim Middle East's largest non-Muslim community, the 6-10 million-strong Coptic Orthodox Christians, who trace their origins in Egypt to the time of the Pharaohs and have maintained their Christian community there for two thousand years. Egypt's government adopts policies and practices that officially sanction discrimination and intolerance against these non-Muslims.

Copts are treated as second class citizens in that they are hampered by the govern-

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ment from building and repairing churches, studying the ancient Coptic language, obtaining justice when they are victimized by religious violence, and obtaining high-level government appointments, and they are harassed and even arrested if they are converts from Islam. As a consequence of such official discrimination, they too are emigrating from their ancient homeland. Bahais are also oppressed by not being able to obtain national identity cards. The Egyptian Jewish community, numbering as in Iraq in the double digits, suffers from an official Egyptian media that is explicitly anti-Semitic.

The minority Shiite population and the Quranist Muslim community have also experienced unequal treatment and repression, including arrest. Though secular, the Mubarak government has been active in imprisoning its critics in the name of Islam. Some members of the Sunni majority who have spoken out on behalf of the Copts or expressed unorthodox views advocating more liberal religious policies, including Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Dr. Nasr Abu Zaid, have at times been arrested and punished for doing so. In recent years, the government arrested Adel Fawzy Faltas and Peter Ezzat, who work for the Canada-based Middle East Christian Association, on the grounds that, in seeking to defend human rights, they had “insulted Islam.” Prominent Egyptian blogger Abdel Kareem Soliman was sentenced to four years imprisonment for “insulting Islam.” Charges of blasphemy are not the only means of state repression, but they are a potent weapon and are used systematically to silence and scapegoat religious minorities, authors, artists, journalists, and human rights reformers. As the late Naguib Mahfouz, the only Arab winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, whose novel *Children of Gebelawi* was banned in Egypt for blasphemy, put it: “no blasphemy harms Islam and Muslims so much as the call for murdering a writer.”

The Mubarak government has created a stark political choice: its repression or that which is bound to characterize rule under the undemocratic, sectarian Muslim Brotherhood. The Obama administration should use the U.S.’s considerable leverage to press Cairo to end such religious repression and intolerance.

The United Nations is another area that will command the new administration’s immediate attention in the contest of ideas. In April, the second UN Conference Against Racism (Durban II) will consider the OIC-initiated proposal to create a new human right that would ban defamation of religion. This in effect is an attempt to universalize pre-modern blasphemy and apostasy laws—in essence, universalize blasphemy laws that have been used to stifle dissent and impede reform and development in the Middle East’s most repressive countries.

This measure would aim to curb the freedom not only of Danish cartoonists, but also of scholars, writers, dissidents, religious reformers, human rights activists, and anyone at all anywhere in the world who criticizes Islam or those who claim to speak for Islam. This is already the effect of the domestic laws against apostasy and blasphemy that exist

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in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, and many other states of the Islamic Conference.

The Obama administration should continue the U.S. position of opposition to this initiative. It should highlight the defense of free speech and belief articulated within an Islamic framework by such pro-freedom Islamic scholars as former President Wahid, Sudanese-American Prof. An Na'im of Emory Law School, and Dr. Abdullah Saeed of the University of Melbourne.

Muslim outreach at home for much of the Bush administration had been limited only to those who claim to speak for all Muslims, or those Muslim organizations with the most funding, usually involving Gulf sources, and the largest publicity machines. American Muslim minorities and dissidents-in-exile have been repeatedly excluded from official government Islamic ceremonies and other events.

When former President Bush, for example, gave his major address to the American Muslim community in 2007, he did so at the Saudi-linked Washington Islamic Center and delegated the invitation list to the Center's management; prominent American Muslim dissidents and Shiite, Sufi, and other minority group representatives were not invited.

On another occasion, a White House personnel officer told me that my recommendation of a member of the spiritual Sufi movement in Islam (the dominant Muslim tendency in Indonesia, Malaysia, India, central Asia, the Balkans, Turkey, and much of Africa) for an administration appointment to a Muslim slot on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom would not even be considered because, the official asserted, Sufis are not "real Muslims." It would seem that our own government fell into a trap of shunning or excluding Muslims deemed "apostates" by Muslim groups bolstered by petrodollars.

Another example involved a State Department website to further public diplomacy in the Muslim world. Called "Muslim Life in America" when it was launched in 2002, it included a photo gallery to show "the sheer variety" of the experience of the Muslim American, but in nearly all pictures the women were veiled. The Rand Corporation assessed it as "exclusively dedicated to traditionalist content, in word and image." Eventually, after public criticism, it was changed.

More recently, the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department circulated internal memos with rules on lexicon relating to Muslims, rules proposed by unnamed Muslim advisers. Among the "rejected" terms were the words "liberty" and "jihad." One wonders about the ideological diversity of these departments' Muslim advisers. This also suggests some in government are confused about whether America should move to another constitutional model, for example, that of Malaysia, where certain Arabic and Muslim words are off-limits to non-Muslims.

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In past administrations, there has been a reluctance to acknowledge the importance of religion to the Muslim world and to engage with it on the issue of religion, including religious freedom. Whether in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, or other countries, religious persecution of those who do not follow prevailing orthodoxies has frequently been accepted or overlooked by the top levels of the State Department. Those Muslims who argue for religious freedom within an Islamic framework are often ignored, even excluded from U.S. government events at home. In sum, working to expand religious freedom and tolerance and to protect religious and ideological pluralism in the Muslim world is key in the contest of ideas. It will often be a difficult and delicate task, but it must no longer be deferred. American tools of soft power should be employed for this purpose. ■

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